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Carmina Argentea



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CARMINA ARGENTEA

BY

E. K. CHAMBERS

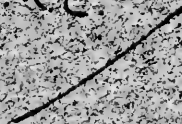
PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR

1918

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CARMINA ARGENTEA

Presentation copy

BY

E. K. CHAMBERS

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ENVOI

To N.C.

A SORRY sheaf of verse to bring
For fifty years of wayfaring
About the waste fields and the sown,
Where harvest of the Muse is grown!
While others load the golden wain,
I pluck chance handfuls of the grain,
And twist them into idle rhyme,
A loiterer, at cockshut time.

Now of those fifty summers spent
For twenty-five alone I went,
And twenty-five with you I trod
The uplands of the Muse's god.
And though I nothing bring at all
To glorify a festival,
Yet, since your heart had been the shrine
For any coronal of mine,
Put there these posies; let them rest,
Poor relics of a broken quest.

Sept. 5th, 1893-1918.

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I

I NEVER longed to be what poets are,
Until the morning of your love that came
Shone into my poor life, and made it flame
With sudden dawn—yourself the phosphor-star.
But now how gladly would I leap the bar,
And 'mid a breathless world's amazed acclaim
Set yours with Laura's, Beatrice's name,
Even in their heaven beyond the heavens so far.

So, when we walk those other ways above,
Your very image, circling on the wing
Of my high verse, should beckon from its sphere,
And show to all men what we meant by love.
But out upon it, alas, I cannot sing!
I needs must hold you closer for it, dear.

II

SO life, you say, must be a blank,
In this old house with crumbling eaves,
Set on an idle river's bank,
And girt about with leaves.

Slowly the spirit moves, in truth,
Beyond your urgent city's walls,
Your tilting-ground for hope and youth,
Where, whoso lingers, falls.

Yet, though we slumber on our lawn,
Great recompense the high gods give ;
All the peculiar pomp of dawn,
Fiery and fugitive,

And birds that serenade the streams,
And secrets whispered in the grass,
And winds that waken from their dreams,
To tell them as they pass.

These are our books ; therein we find
Lore that your city bustles by,
The lesson of a quiet mind,
Natural philosophy.

III

AH yes! you have the better part,
Who shun the fretful city's tide,
And weave philosophy with art,
By that still river's side.

The swallows circle round your trees ;
Peach-blossom crowns your crumbling wall ;
And in your borders many bees
Keep flowery festival.

Your soul has taken Nature's hue,
And daily to your purgèd eyes
The various maid unveils anew
Her solemn mysteries.

Yours are the pageants of the dawn ;
For you the sun sinks robed in fire ;
The moonlight throws upon your lawn
The shadow of a spire.

We dwell within a weary land,
Dull tenants of a leafless street,
With London's laugh on either hand,
Her pavement at our feet.

The Thames sweeps sobbing through the town ;
Dun vapours taint the morning air ;
Through yellow fogs the sun peers down,
And night is black despair.

Yet Nature's voice even here may reach.
Anon she comes in singing mood,
And startles with a sudden speech
The spirit's solitude.

A vision through an open gate,
A touch of wonder in the stars,
A flower, make amends for fate,
And snap the prison bars.

IV

RISE, love, and leave the city! Tired will,
Tired eyes can bear no longer with streets grey,
And squares whereto the summer comes not still,
Though the laburnum's gold be dropped away.
Rise, it is time to go!
And ere the sun be low,
We will be there on some high-bosomed hill,
To catch his parting glow.

We will be wanderers for a month or more
From inn to inn throughout the laughing land;
And watch the lark from daisied meadows soar,
And rob the hedges upon either hand;
And each fresh day shall give,
To last while we two live,
From out her sheaf of memories a store
Of joys contemplative.

We will set forth at morning, when the dew
Sheds diamond largess upon every bush
And glorifies the grass. For us the new
And jubilant carols of the awakened thrush,
High in his hawthorn bower,
Shall celebrate the hour ;
And as we walk, I'll weave a crown for you
Of the faint wild-rose flower.

Then while the sun, perfervid overhead,
At mid-day makes the broom and bracken hot,
In some deep dell we'll build a thymy bed,
And breathe June's perfumes in that secret spot,
Where the grasshopper sings
In fairies' dancing rings,
And the great orange fritillaries spread
Their silver-washen wings.

And when the long reluctant daylight fails
And the moon rises, will it not be good
To watch the bats flit by on leathern sails,
Hawking the vagrant moths within the wood ;
And, where no sound of cars
The restful silence mars,
To listen to the amorous nightingales,
And count the glow-worm stars ?

V

IN the dull square, beyond the iron railing,
Wearily Autumn stretches forth her hand,
Tragic in hint of death that is assailing
The gardens of the land.

Here not the flaming sunset of the beeches,
Not the red glory of the maple's fall,
Nor splendid passion of those Pangbourne reaches,
Summer's enrubied pall.

Only a tired wind sobbing in the branches,
Only the plane-trees desolate and torn,
Only the russet leaves in avalanches
Blown about path and lawn.

Others may weep the ruin of the roses,
Grieve for the passing of the gracious year;
Spring gives but little to our London closes,
Autumn's the less to fear.

VI

CROCUS with heart of gold,
Crocus brown-stoled !
Leaping with jubilant flame,
All in a morning you came
Out of the mould.

Like to the sudden word,
Just overheard,
Of a cuckoo in April's tree;
—Oh, the dear melody,
His minor third !—

Like to the quick replies
Of my love's eyes ;
Like to all things that are
Sudden and swift and rare,
In earth or skies.

VII

CLORINDA died this day last year ;
And yet once more the sweet flowers blow,
As though in truth they did not know .
How all that made their beauty dear
With her lies darkling down below.

Have they forgotten then how well
Clorinda loved to keep in spring
Calendar of their blossoming,
From the first primrose of the dell,
Until the rose in June was king ?

Have they forgotten how she'd place
Great pansies in her garden plot,
With curious tulips in a knot,
And bid the daffodils do grace
Gold-crowned in many a shady spot ?

Yes, they forget ; and thou, O Earth,
An irresponsive mistress art,
That never for a breaking heart
Still'st the mad music of thy mirth,
Nor in our tears hast any part.

VIII

BENEATH a rose-red sky of June
The thrush and she sang both one tune.
With mouth of song and heart of flame,
Through the rose-garth my lady came ;
Red roses at her breast she bare,
Red roses in her loosened hair.
The solemn gardeners smiled to see
My lady in her jollity.

When next I passed the rose-garth by,
A white-rose moon clomb up the sky ;
White roses overarching grew,
And roses white the mound did strew,
Where that white matchless beauty lay
At rest, at last, beneath the clay.
With downcast eyes the gardeners all
Were carving her memorial.

IX

O CITY of despair, that knows not day,
O towers unseen
Of Westminster, behind your blotting screen
Of murky vapours, where a lurid flare
Must darkly illumine
The utter and impenetrable gloom,
Pierced by no ray
Of that diviner light,
Which at the blare
Of dawn should hunt with silver spears the lagging
 night!
O poisonous river, ever rolling on
A turbid tide,
Where uncouth barges glide
Most like that craft, we deem,
That voyages the subterranean stream
Cleped Acheron,
And bears disastrous freight
Of souls that seek the irrevocable shores of fate
And popped dream!

O most disconsolate
And melancholy streets, where to and fro,
With downcast eyes and no delight,
Men come and go,
And curse the bread they earn in sorrow so!
Is any hope
Beneath your leaden cope?
What can ye say
To comfort those from whom your blackness bars
Earth's common boon,
The unbared splendour of the sun at noon,
The exultation of the midnight stars?

X

LO! sudden on the white page set,
The marvellous poem, mine, not mine.
The night was all a trouble and fret,
An hour's burden to build a line.
Then in the morning's hush it seemed
The spirit quickened and lightened and in flame,
Or ever the startled brain of its coming deemed,
The great song came.

Thus in the blackness of the prime
The glittering galaxies that burn
Swung yet unlit in heaven. Time
Crept darkling; for an aeon's turn
Creation stood of light bereft,
Until, moving silent and swift through the spaces far,
God's finger touched a blot in the dark and left
His firstling star.

XI

I HAVE been walking—walking in Powder Hill!
Green waved the oaks above,
Haunt of the butterflies;
Blue lay the floor beneath,
Hyacinth-paven.

Heart of my heart, how it all came back to me!
O those indolent mornings and high noons,
Spilth of my youth on these hills;
Yonder the city of dreams
Slept in the hush of her spires.
Yonder the Abingdon vale
Stretched, like my life to be lived,
Limitless, hazy and blue.

XII

To N. H.

FROM Hartland Point to high Trevoze
The watchful beacons wink and flare ;
And in the guarded verge of those
Tall lights the herring fishers fare.

They beat about an iron coast,
And hold their lives in hand to save
A little pittance at the most,
The unequal bargain of the wave.

And long before the learned thought
To touch the headlands with their flame,
Before the daring masons wrought,
The herring fishers went the same.

Before Tintagel's mystery,
Before the coming of the Celt,
It was the burden of the sea
The neolithic peoples felt.

They set a lantern on the mast,
And launched into the unquiet bay ;
They haled the heavy nets to cast,
As herring fishers do to-day.

And oft a skin-clad wife would roam
At daybreak on a driven shore,
To seek across the cruel foam
A coracle that came no more.

XIII

BENEATH the olive yard they knew
Volumnius with Volumnia sleeps ;
The circle of the Umbrian blue
Watch o'er their endless silence keeps.

A cypress spire marks the spot,
Where they wait out each lingering year,
And other masters till the plot,
That to their wedded hearts was dear.

The lit lamp in the rock-hewn cell
For centuries past no comfort brings ;
The Genius that should guard them well
Hath wearied long and drooped his wings.

The storied chests their figures bear,
Each with a coin to counter death ;
And what the hope that set them there
No chronicle or scripture saith.

Maybe they thought to come again
And walk their own familiar fields,
Or dreamed of some Elysian plain,
Whose soil unasked its fruitage yields.

Whate'er the riddle of their race,
They have no answer yet, while slow
Above their chosen trysting-place,
Year in, year out, the ploughmen go.

XIV

'In memory of Thomasine Trenoweth, aged 23.'

THE little meadow by the sand,
Where Tamsin lies, is ringed about
With acres of the scented thyme.
The salt wind blows in all that land ;
The great clouds pace across the skies ;
Rare wanderers from the ferry climb.
One might sleep well enough, no doubt,
Where Tamsin lies.

Tamsin has sunshine now and wind,
And all in life she might not have,
The silence and the utter peace
That tempest-winnowed spirits find
On slopes that front the western wave.
The white gulls circle without cease
O'er Tamsin's grave.

XV

WHEN my last book is written, and the days,
The golden days, grow dim, and I must sit,
As old men do, and wait the end of it
In some warm corner of my garden ways;
Or dreaming idly by a winter's blaze
Live over again the adventure exquisite,
When all the mountain tops with dawn were lit,
And lyric youth went singing roundelays;
Then, of the memories poor Time may save,
I know of three that most will visit me—
The vale where Rotha rolls her waters brown
To that still lake that laps by Wordsworth's grave,
Green meadows and grey walls of Oxford town,
And Cornwall sleeping by a halcyon sea.

XVI

SHAKESPEARE, we need thy solace in this day;
Not for the bugles blown about our skies,
Calling our quick-foot youth for enterprise,
To which thine Agincourt was but the play
Of children armed in spring-time; nor for eyes
That noble women bear upon their way,
Eyes that keep secret the poor heart's dismay,
Till the proud head on the wet pillow lies:
Not these! but malice up and down our streets,
The babbling tongues, the minds that cannot hold
An equal course till Time's full circle meets,
The fretful pens shod with an egoist's gold.

Master, deep read in man's fantastic brain,
Smile from thy sculptured stone, and leave us
sane.

XVII

I LIKE to think of Shakespeare, not as when
In our old London of the spacious time
He took all amorous hearts with honeyed rhyme ;
Or flung his jest at Burbage and at Ben ;
Or speared the flying follies with his pen ;
Or, in deep hour, made Juliet's love sublime ;
Or from Lear's kindness and Iago's crime
Caught tragic hint of heaven's dark way with men.
These were great memories, but he laid them down.
And when, with brow composed and friendly tread,
He sought the little streets of Stratford town,
That knew his dreams and soon must hold him dead,
I like to think how Shakespeare pruned his rose,
And ate his pippin in his orchard close.

XVIII

ALWAYS my heart beats high,
When I enter the Corpus gate,
And cross the quad to the cloister dim,
Where a hundred memories wait.

Masters and friends of old,
The names from their tablets shine,
As I softly tread on the paven floor,
That has heard their steps and mine.

They handed the torch to us,
Sent down from the distant days,
That the Founder lit when he built these walls.
They taught us to know, and to praise.

And yonder oaken stair
Leads up to a room I know,
That looks on a golden mead afar
And a garden's turf below.

Oh room, deep windowed, still,
Where the great and the wise had power,
And Plato and Shakespeare laid their spell
On youth's unforgotten hour!

But the room is empty now,
Empty the stairways all;
No laughter threads the dialled quad
Of men who flock to hall.

The empty College sleeps.
Nay! She sleeps not, but lies
Wakeful, with ready heart to catch
The lightest word that flies

Of sons who keep to-day
In Flanders dearly bought,
Or on Cape Helles' fearful shore,
The symbol that she taught.

They bear her torch indeed,
Who fight in honour's name
For human faith and kindness
And an old tradition's claim.

Corpus, mother of men,
These shall come back to thee !
Some in the flesh ; and some, most dear,
A silent company,

When the soft night winds blow,
Trooping shall come once more,
Each up the stairway he loved best
To his familiar door.

For them the ancient calm
Dreamed of in dust and shell,
And for thy book the storied names
Of those who learnt life well.

And ever new sons shall rise
To hold thy torch unspilled,
Fit lads to be fashioned into men,
As the great Founder willed.

XIX

To M.D.

MARGARET, while skies are blue and clear,
And the great days in sunshine ride,
The pageant of this rose-hung year
Shall stop, to take you up, a bride.

Your friends, we witness, side by side,
The shadows lengthen on our lawn.
They bring us to our eventide;
Your face is set towards the dawn.

Joy from the stricken world doth hide,
But Youth and Hope are in your train.
For you may healing Time provide
Earth's old felicities again.

XX

O COMRADES gathered from the night,
We have a simple tale to tell.
Poor folk, we cannot tell aright ;
But in Judaea it befell.

When all the world was held with frost,
And cold stars tingled to the morn,
When faith was not and love was lost,
The hope of all the world was born.

They came, the shepherds and the kings.
Plain men, like us, the shepherds were ;
They had no store of crowns or rings,
But homely, childish gifts they bare:

The kings were stiff with gems and gold ;
Their eastern hearts were humble too ;
They knelt them down within the fold,
And worshipped him, as ye should do.

And there were evil kings that day.
As evil kings are now, who heard,
And swung the ready sword to slay,
And cared not for the plighted word.

To-day the world is dumb with pain
Of peoples that embattled are,
And love is turned to hate again,
And hope is narrowed to a star.

O comrades, when our play is done,
Though dark the way and dim your sight,
Before the rising of the sun,
We bid you courage through the night.

XXI

THE Cornish wind blows light to-day ;
With sun the Cornish cliffs are warm ;
Like butterflies about the bay
The brown sails and the white sails swarm.

The weeping of the troubled world
Is hushed into a far-off dream ;
The sunken ships, the armies hurled,
As tales of Troy or Arthur seem.

While Europe's fateful hours creep
To that last field of destiny,
The little quiet shadows sleep
Upon Polruan by the sea.

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